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History and Monumentality

While traditionally the epic film served as an expression of national emergence and national consciousness, Robert Burgoyne argues that the "recent release of several spectacular films set in the ancient and medieval past" attests not only to the resiliency of this genre but also to the double voicing at issue in a monumental re-enactment of history on screen.[1] A film such as Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2005) gives a transnational accent to the epic's expression of national mythology, self-consciously addressed as it is to a global market, even while speaking more to the political concerns of contemporary media politics than seeking an authorative representation of the ancient world. With the advent of CGI (computer-generated imagery), furthermore, spectacular monumentalism has once again emerged as the significant trait of the genre, bringing in a second aspect of double voicing. Hereto, Burgoyne adds that *Gladiator*, "with its computer-enhanced sets of the Colosseum and the Roman Forum, introduced to

1 See the introduction to Robert Burgoyne's edited volume *The Epic Film in World Culture* (London: Routledge, 2011) 2.

a new audience the surge and splendor of epic form familiar from older films such as *Cleopatra* (1963)".[2] In other words, monumental epic films not only appropriate the past for the present but do so by recycling previous cinematic re-imaginations of history. With this essay, I want to revisit the monumentalism of the epic genre, known for its flamboyant sets and costumes, its mass choreography and its histrionic mise-en-scène, so as to explore how the excessive visual style makes use of the past to offer a commentary on the contemporary global mediatization of politics. If Roland Barthes praised the power of the exaggerated mise-en-scène of the epic film, claiming that it placed us on a "balcony of history", at issue is the additional gain a self-conscious aesthetic refiguration of history affords.[3] The excess of the monumental visual style and mise-en-scène, far from playing to a verisimilitude effect, explicitly foregrounds its own cinematic textuality, making, as will be argued in this essay, a claim for a visceral appropriation of the past by virtue of cinematic recyclings that straddle diegetic refigurations of history with an extradiegetic distance bespeaking to the contemporary moment.

It is, therefore, fruitful to recall that in his essay "Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen: Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie", Friedrich Nietzsche invokes the notion of monumentalism for his claim that we need history only in so far as it serves the contemporary moment [dem Leben dient].[4] Hollywood's re-figuration of the past, after all, touches on the neuralgic point in Nietzsche's argument in favor of an unhistorical dealing with the past, treating seminal historical events not as something static or established but as something open to renegotiation. The claim for a monumental history, he argues, consists in the conviction that what was once vibrant, sparkling and grand [lebendig, hell und gross] remains eternally so. Yet, to maintain its affective force and produce a transhistoric narrative, a monumental past must overlook all differences, disparities and irregularities: "[S]o lange die Vergangenheit als nachahmungswürdig, als nachahmbar und zum zweiten Male möglich beschrieben werden muss, ist sie jedenfalls in der Gefahr, etwas verschoben, in's Schöne umgedeutet und damit der freien Erdichtung angenähert zu werden". Indeed, as though he were anticipating the reconfiguration of historical facts undertaken by Hollywood's script-writers and

2 Burgoyne 2011, 4.

3 See Roland Barthes, "Au cinémascope", Lettres Nouvelles (février 1954), reprinted in Roland Barthes, *Oeuvres complètes*. Tome I 1942–1965, ed. Eric Marty (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1993) 580.

4 Friedrich Nietzsche, "Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben". *Sämtliche Werke. Kritisch Studienausgabe*, Bd. 1, ed. Giorgio Colli & Mazzino Montinari (München: DTV, 1980) 247.

directors, Nietzsche adds, "[J]a es giebt Zeiten, die zwischen einer monumentalischen Vergangenheit und einer mythischen Fiction gar nicht zu unterscheiden vermögen, weil aus der einen Welt genau dieselben Antriebe entnommen werden können, wie aus der anderen".[5]

For Nietzsche, such recourse to the magnificence of the past is tantamount to a critique of the present. "Wenn der Mensch, der Grosses schaffen will, überhaupt die Vergangenheit braucht, so bemächtigt er sich ihrer vermittels der monumentalischen Historie", he concludes, even while warning that by overvalorizing the past, such history writing runs the risk of screening out the present. For Nietzsche, then, the motto of monumentalism may well be: "[L]asst die Todten die Lebendigen begraben".[6] For this reason, a history that serves the contemporary moment must straddle all admiration for the past with a willingness to judge and overwrite it, so that it will make way for the future. The premise of my revisitation of Hollywood's epic cinema is that in its excessive self-reflexivity it is particularly this genre that straddles what Nietzsche calls monumental and critical history writing, in that its double voicing self-consciously negotiates and refigures the past so as to make this legacy productive both for the future of cinema and for the specific cultural context to which each new wave of epic refiguration speaks. Scott's *Gladiator* offers a particularly poignant example for Hollywood's monumental engagement with the past and the double voicing this is predicated on. It looks to a moment in Roman history when the empire that had come to assert its hegemony after the demise of Cleopatra's rule, finds itself at a point of transition; recalling its glorious past in the hope of restoring its grand values. Both the second and third part of this essay will then look back to two iconic Hollywood refigurations of this earlier historical consolidation of Roman hegemony at the expense of Egypt's power, namely the resilient allure and ultimate demise of the last Egyptian pharaoh. Both *Gladiator* and the two Cleopatra films – the first by Cecil B. DeMille (1934), the second by Joseph L. Mankiewicz (1963) – evoke a grand moment in history so as to comment on a mediatization of politics in the 20th century.

In the case of *Gladiator*, such self-reflexive commentary pertains to the dangerous populism violent mass entertainment inspires. Along the lines of Nietzsche's evaluation of monumental history, the Roman warrior Maximus (Russell Crowe) is cast in a narrative of exoneration that paints the heroic past as vibrant, sparkling and grand so as to address the lack of heroism in the contemporary world. There once were proud, wise, strong heroes, thus the film implicitly claims, and as members of a transhistoric community of grand historical

5 Nietzsche 1980, 262.
6 Nietzsche 1980, 270.

figures, they continue to have their effect. *Gladiator* transcodes the historical events of the Roman Empire into a melodramatic family story about the transition from one generation to the next. On his deathbed, Marcus Aurelius (Richard Harris) designates his valiant commander to be his successor so that Maximus might rule Rome until the Senate is politically powerful enough to take over and once more govern in the spirit of the old Republic. As such, *Gladiator* espouses a nostalgic notion of a lost political culture in ancient Rome that must be re-installed. After having been degraded to the status of a slave, Maximus will fight in the Roman arena for a vision of the Roman Empire which, as he had explained to Marcus Aurelius on his deathbed, he himself inherited from Caesar. In fact, it was this vision that compelled him to take up his battle against barbaric forces in foreign lands. In response, the dying politician had insisted that the corruption currently ruling over Rome stands in contradiction to the dream this Empire was once founded on. By choosing Maximus as his successor, Marcus Aurelius hopes to re-establish this lost dream (and in this Ridley Scott picks up on Mankiewicz' Cleopatra and her dream of a global empire, as will be shown further on).

Scott's monumental re-enactment of the past resurrects a past utopic vision as a project for the future which offers a self-reflexive comment on its own mediality in so far as Hollywood's genre films were always designed to translate contemporary worries and desires into coherent stories. Their aim was to offer mythic resolutions for antagonisms of political reality for which no simple solutions could be found. As Michael Wood notes, "[T]he elegance of the theory is that the solution has to be imaginary because the dilemma is authentic – if there were a real solution, the myth wouldn't be needed". For this reason, he adds that "virtually any Hollywood movie, however trivial, and whatever its intentions, can be seen as a text for a rather special kind of social history: the study of what might be called the back of the American mind".[7] The epic film nevertheless takes on a specific function within Hollywood's production and dissemination of mythic narratives. The world of antiquity not only serves an ideological agenda but can also be understood as an enormous, manifold trope for Hollywood itself. "Even when shot on location or in studios in Italy and Spain", Michael Wood explains, "these movies are always about the creation of such a world in a movie, about Hollywood's capacity to duplicate old splendors, to bring Jerusalem and Rome to the screen, as the old phrase had it".[8] The nostalgic gesture of dehistorization corresponds to the explicit fictionality on which

7 See Michael Wood, *America in the Movies* (New York: Basic Books, 1975) 126.
8 Wood 1975, 165.

Hollywood's genre cinema has always insisted, by producing dream images to address and appease contemporary cultural concerns.

Like so many epic films, including both versions of *Cleopatra* addressed in this article, Scott's *Gladiator* recasts politics as a battle between brothers. At issue is whether the grand political vision of imperial Rome is systemically grounded in corruption and fanaticism or whether it can again be cleansed of this stain. Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix), refusing to follow the last will of Marcus Aurelius, instead kills his father to claim power for himself. Against the notion of a Republican Rome that Maximus represents, he successfully asserts his own ambitious tyranny and abolishes the Senate. The third figure in this family feud is the woman both men desire. The widowed Lucilla (Connie Nielson), Caesar's daughter, acts as a broker between Maximus and Commodus. Initially, she gives in to the power hunger of her brother because she hopes, with her influence, to mitigate his megalomania. She then turns around and supports the political intrigue of the Senators against Commodus, as a result of which Maximus is to be freed and called upon to invade Rome with his army. To protect her son from her brother's wrath, she turns once more and betrays the plan of the conspirators, forcing Maximus to fight for the political vision of her father in one last staged battle in the Roman Arena, where he will triumph against his enemy in a double sense. The mythic resolution *Gladiator* offers is both political and private. Lucilla had explained to Maximus that Commodus hates him not because Marcus Aurelius had designated him to be his successor, but because he had been the object of both her own and her father's love. Over his dead body, she can now adore with impunity the man, who, with his self-sacrifice, was able to preserve the threatened values of the Roman Republic (a translation of affects that is indebted to both cinematic re-imaginations of Cleopatra).

A seminal contradiction nevertheless underlies the moral argument of *Gladiator*. Even if Commodus had not ruled in the interest of the Roman people, his re-opening of the Roman arena is understood as an expression of precisely the populism which Ridley Scott has recourse to for his own critique of the politics of contemporary mass entertainment. In the Roman Arena, politically poignant questions are staged as a battle between life and death, given that Commodus' thumb signal, which determines the survival of the contestants, is dependent on the shifting mood of the audience. In *Gladiator*, monumentality as a self-reflexive comment on the mediality of epic films, is thus primarily predicated on the visceral charisma of its warrior hero. The former gladiator Proximus (Oliver Reed) explains to his star fighter: "Win the crowd and you'll win your freedom". And indeed, Maximus poses such a threat to Commodus precisely because, having managed to become a hero of the arena, he is able to instrumentalize the Roman populace for his own political agenda. Scott's appropriation of a monumental history thus sustains his critique of a corrupt politicization of the media world by pitting against the banality of contemporary celebrity culture the charismatic figure of Maximus, whose appearance in the arena is unequivocally sublime.

At the same time, two contradictions cannot be overlooked. For one, Scott attacks the visceral power of the very media culture from whose mass spectacles he himself, as a director of a monumental epic film, profits. For another, his moral argument against alleged political corruption draws attention to an ideological discrepancy which had already troubled classic epics such as Anthony Mann's *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) und Mankiewicz' *Cleopatra* (1963); two films to which the visual style of the mass scenes – the entrance of the victorious military commander in Rome, the battles in the Roman Arena – make explicit reference. The battle against the Huns in the opening sequence of *Gladiator* may celebrate the unconditional loyalty the Roman soldiers have for their General Maximus, who unleashes hell on everyone standing against his vision of a noble Rome. The visual opulence of the rest of the film, however, belongs to the power domain of the alleged tyrant Commodus. Indeed it is at his command that we enjoy the gladiator games as grand spectacles, in which Russell Crowe can prove his star quality as a contemporary actor, playing the role of a degraded Roman general, re-enacting past battles for the rapt entertainment of the Roman populace. From the point of the mythic narrative it presents, *Gladiator* may cast a nostalgic gaze on this moment in Roman history, attesting to the fragility of Marcus Aurelius' grand political vision, but the monumentality of the film images are pitched against this moralizing imperative. For its exonerating narratives about the struggle between tyrants and noble heroes, the genre of the epic film has always offered flamboyant sets and costumes that undermine the mythic resolution these films offer for contemporary political anxieties they transcode into stories from antiquity (be this the need for heroism or a nostalgic revision of the past so as to critique the present). The opulence of the visual style allows the audience to enjoy the corrupt world of mass entertainment while the narrative resolution aims at overcoming the moral depravity it lavishly puts on display. For the duration of the film, we, like the audience in the Roman arena, can have our proverbial cake and eat it.

Cecil B. DeMille's *Cleopatra*

Hardly a director embodies this contradiction between moral critique and monumentality as prominently as Cecile B. DeMille, known not only as the master

of cinematic extravaganzas but also of the 'compensating values' that, by the mid-1930s, became a requirement once the Hays Production Code was fully in place. Its censorship regulations maintained that as long as sin was ultimately punished and virtue ruled in the end, guilty pleasures, immorality and voluptuousness could be brought to the screen.[9] Thus, as one of the most ingenious directors at Paramount Studios, DeMille was able to straddle the requirement to produce morally edifying entertainment even while playing into the populism of his audience. His monumental cinematic history lessons cannot be subjected to any simplified reading because even as the moral deviancy of his heroes and heroines comes to be punished with the final tableau, transgressive excess was what enabled their box office success. Far from canceling each other out, luxurious visual pleasure and moral edification emerge as two sides of the same coin.

Cleopatra (1934) stands out from the other epics DeMille made during the years of the Great Depression in that it doesn't tell the story of a suppressed people, supported by God in their revolt against tyranny, but rather depicts that last female rule of an ancient dynasty, forced to abdicate her power before imperial Rome. Not only does the film's monumentalist gesture offer no pejorative comment on the oriental splendor Cleopatra puts on display to establish and maintain her sovereignty, instead re-encoding it in terms of contemporary consumer culture. It also produces unequivocal sympathy for this last Egyptian pharaoh, even if it is true that throughout the film narrative, she is shown to be a sly politician. At the beginning she is presented as a gamble Julius Caesar is willing to undertake in order to have access to the riches of India. Then, having learned her political savvy from this powerful Roman leader, she shows herself willing first to entice Mark Antony with her allure and then sacrifice him at any moment for her own schemes. And yet, in her fated confrontation with Octavius, DeMille's Cleopatra is above all suspicious of corruption and injustice. In the closing sequence of the film, Claudette Colbert's performance shifts from self-confident ruler to eternal lover. As she explains to her two serving women, Iras and Charmian, blessed with the fortune of having found love, she must give all. Yet throughout the film, DeMille had embellished the sensual effects of her resilient rule to such a degree that the sublimation cemented with this final tableau, showing her dressed in full royal regalia sitting upright on her throne after having taken the fatal asp to her barely disclosed breast, makes self-sacrifice itself appear erotic.[10]

9 See David Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990).

10 See Carlos Clarend's entry on "Cecil B. DeMille", *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary. The Major Film-Makers*, Vol. 1, ed. Richard Roud (New York: The Viking P, 1980) 265–271.

The monumentalism of the epic genre allowed DeMille to present history by transferring all mimesis into a colossal spectacle which celebrated above all itself. As Michael Wood contends, this master of the epic form was never only concerned with bringing significant moments in world history to the screen. Equally seminal to him was the accomplishment of his own film production with and against the studio's interests. This directorial triumph finds its narrative correlation in the manner in which Colbert's Cleopatra is able to convince two Roman leaders, Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, to support her cause, even while thwarting the desire of Octavius to include her in his triumphal procession in Rome, preferring instead to offer one last spectacle with her staged corpse. "In the contexts of these triumphs", Wood suggests, "the movies' own engineering feats made perfect, harmonious sense, the whole show became a celebration of magnificent, improbable conquests".[11] The tagline advertised *Cleopatra* as "The Glory That was Egypt! The Grandeur That Was Rome!" And indeed, the grandness of the historical event finds its cinematic correlation in the bigness of the screen, the technical virtuosity, the excessive set décor and costumes, the exuberant mise-en-scène of the massively conceived scenes as well as the extraordinary costs of the entire undertaking.

DeMille's *Cleopatra* is, however, also a particularly vivid example for the way his idiosyncratic celebration of monumentalism thrives on fusing lavish display with the renouncement of all earthly pleasures in that, in this historic re-imagination, the Egyptian pharaoh is clearly adapted to the taste of the mid-1930s to produce. Colbert plays her as an elegant woman of the leisured class, whose exquisite appearance and opulent entertainments were meant to appeal to a feminine audience who, since the late 19th century, had consistently gained access in the work place and whose dramatic rise in wealth had turned them into significant buyers of luxury consumer goods. As Maria Wyke notes, by the 1930s, the film frame came to function "as a living display window occupied by marvelous mannequins", while cinema shops and other retail outlets used the audience identification with the star Claudette Colbert to "sell a range of products such as hats, cigarettes, shoes, and soap".[12] One scene in the film, in which Cleopatra's serving women bring her costly jewels and dresses to choose from for her appearance in the Roman Senate, explicitly raises associations to a department store like Macy's, where the women spectators could buy gowns, style accessories, sandals, hair curlers and perfumes that would allow them to partake of the seductive allure of Colbert/Cleopatra in their own everyday lives.

11 Wood 1975, 177.

12 Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema, and History* (London: Routledge, 1997) 98.

The advertisement campaigns of Lux Soap and Marcovitch Egyptian Cigarettes explicitly used film stills from *Cleopatra*, while the advertisement strategy of Paramount proclaimed: "Season's Styles Go 'Cleopatra'! From Head To Toe Fashionable Ladies Emulate Egypt's Queen".[13]

With her deep baritone voice, Colbert's interpretation transformed the Egyptian queen into a sophisticated, witty, self-reliant and resourceful professional woman, projecting the image of a woman who is able to take care of herself yet would also be an ideal companion for the leisured American man. At the same time, her economic power as a star at Paramount studios was so significant that she was able to have a voice in determining her screen presentation. As a result, she had her say in designing the sets in such a way that she would always make her appearance from that side of the room most flattering to her face and figure. If she had a hand in how DeMille directed her in the film, the trailer for *Cleopatra* gestures toward a further correspondence between director and female star. Initially we see DeMille at his desk, looking into the camera as he explains his fascination for this "symbol of romance and love, of power, passion and intrigue". Placing his monumental film in a long literary tradition ranging from Plutarch and Shakespeare to Shaw, he insists that she "still remains a mystery, eternal as the sphinx", so as to segue into a series of clips from his own film. These culminate in the spectacular battle at Actium, where a close-up of Claudette Colbert's face is superimposed on the nocturnal scene, in which she and Mark Antony find themselves locked in her palace, surrounded by Octavian's forces. As the trailer returns to DeMille, we see for one brief moment this close-up of Colbert/Cleopatra superimposed over a medium shot of her director, sitting at his desk, about to make his final pitch to the audience by calling it one of the great love stories. The morality transmitted with Colbert/Cleopatra's claim for a sacrifice to true love, with which the film ends, covers over both the violence of war this sublime romance was predicated on as well as the self-determined power of the star who embodies it on screen, while the trailer draws attention to precisely this other narrative.

Anticipating the melodramatic mise-en-scène of *Gladiator*, DeMille also casts the political battle between Egypt and Rome as a family feud, with the assassination of Julius Caesar calling forth the rivalry between his two successors Mark Antony and Octavian. The battle for Egypt is told as a double love story, in which Cleopatra first entices the older politician and then his favorite military commander. The romantic alliance between her and Mark Antony, culminating in their joint suicide, may offer a moral compensation for the representation of sensual excess on which Cleopatra's Oriental allure is based. Yet, by appropriating ancient history to befit America's contemporary cultural concerns of the 1930s, foregrounded is the modernity of feminine sovereignty, not only because Colbert's Cleopatra has taken on the costume of urban modernity but also the resilient self-determination of the new professional woman. If the mise-en-scène of her entrance into Rome plays with the visual difference between Colbert's stylish sophistication and both the dowdiness of the plebian women, marveling that her dress is all gold, and the simplified elegance of the haughty aristocrats judging her, it also presents her as a poised sovereign, aloofly scanning her audience to read the effect of her spectacular self-display.

13 Maria Wyke & Dominic Montserrat, "Glamour Girls: Cleomania in Mass Culture", *Cleopatra: A Sphinx Revisited*, ed. Margaret M. Miles (Berkeley: U of California P, 2011) 172–194.

In the scene of seduction at Tarsus, furthermore, where Cleopatra compels Marc Antony to come to her on her ship, only to produce such a lavish and enticing display of her wealth that he cannot resist her charms, she even directly addresses the fact that she is the director of a performance whose sensual excess is meant to bewitch. Pretending to confess her strategy, Cleopatra tells Mark Antony why she wanted to meet him on her territory and not the square as he had commanded. "I had show after show with which to dazzle you, but Antony is not a man to dazzle if he doesn't please", she admits, shaking her head and seemingly laughing at her foolish scheme. Then she claps her hand to signal the beginning of precisely one of these shows and we see her looking furtively at the Roman conqueror to note with pleasure that he is not as resistant to spectacular display as he makes out to be. As Wyke notes, "[I]n an amusing double bluff, she even talks to a foolish Antony explicitly of the plans she had had to dazzle him at the very moment that she proves their usefulness".[14]

To foreground visually one last time the double voicing at issue, the editing of the final sequence moves from a close-up of her ecstatic face, enrapt in the passion of her sacrifice, to a medium shot that captures her regally poised on her throne, intercut with images of the Roman army breaking down the door of her monumental death chamber. Finally the long shot shows her frozen into a *tableau mort*, folded back into the lavish ornamental décor she had so perfectly commanded as her stage. As the light begins to fade, a heavy stone door closes upon this scene, barring any further vision of her forever. The final tableau may re-encode this powerful female sovereign as one of the great lovers of mythology (taking her place next to Juliet, Delila and Isolde, as DeMille assures us in the trailer), but she is shown to be in command of the spectacle to the very end.

As Vivian Sobchack notes, in epic films, history emerges "not so much from any *particular accuracy* or even *specificity* of detail and event as it does from a

14 Maria Wyke, *The Roman Mistress: Ancient and Modern* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) 302.

transcendence of accuracy and specificity enabled by a *general* and *excessive* parade and accumulation of detail and event".[15] The self-reflexivity written into the monumental gestures, explicitly exceeding and transcending any concrete, verifiable past but also any realistic present, makes for the affective power of this historical re-imagination. The expansiveness and excessiveness explicitly presents the events depicted on screen as artifice, but as such as possibility, corresponding to the dream the heroines and heroes of epic films are driven by in their struggles with tyrants. As Sobchack adds, "[T]he importance of the genre is not that it narrates and dramatizes historical events accurately according to the detailed stories of academic historians but rather that it opens a temporal field that creates the *general* possibility for re-cognizing oneself as a *historical subject* of a particular kind".[16] The excessive is what makes for the recognition of the past in the present and for the possibilities of the future.

Cecil B. DeMille's *Cleopatra* thus allows one to formulate a set of criteria for the way monumental epic films revisit past history, such that they render visible the relationship between the epochal significance of particular historical events and their aesthetic refiguration as lavishly designed cinematic spectacle in a contemporary context. Only the greatest transitions in world history, such as the founding, reconstitution or demise of an empire can serve as the story for the monumentality produced on screen, given that the financial, technical and aesthetic expense must be justified by the importance of the theme. At the same time, this grand global history can only be told as the story of individual players, because only the personalization of historical events guarantees the emotional transference on the part of audience on which entertainment films thrive; in the case of *Cleopatra* both the identification with the fate of the heroine and the charisma of the star embodying her. In other words, historical events are re-encoded as family stories, dealing with the shift from one generation to the next, and concomitant with this the question who will carry on the moral legacy of one's ancestors. This conflict can be staged as the rivalry between two brothers vying for the love of a parent figure (Maximus and Commodus in relation to Marcus Aurelius; Mark Antony and Octavian in relation to Julius Caesar), even while a female love interest stands between the two opponents, or, as in Cleopatra's case, plays the one brother against the other. The emotional development both the hero and the heroine undergo pits their duty to their role as rulers against their personal desires, which are either in conflict with their symbolic mandate or subsumed by this.

15 Vivian Sobchack, "'Surge and Splendor': A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic", *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: U of Texas P, 1995) 285.
16 Sobchack 1995, 286.

Furthermore, as epic films transcend any accurate depiction of a concrete past, the monumentalist exaltation depletes these world historical events of their specificity, even while, in Roland Barthes' definition of the mythic signifier, this puts the historically specific at a distance, holds it at one's disposal, rather than suppressing its meaning.[17] Instead, all reference to world history comes to be enmeshed with a morally edifying message so that for the audience the historical dimension (Cleopatra's real political sovereignty) is more in focus at times, at others the moralistic interpretation (her willingness to sacrifice herself for love) is foregrounded. Nevertheless, the strategies of fictionalization that reconceive sites and actions of the past as Hollywood sets thrive on a claim to authenticity. Only this translation into the visual style and narrative design of mainstream Hollywood endows past history with a popular face and a visceral appeal. As such, epic films always deploy a double voicing aimed at reflecting and commenting on the contemporary context out of which this historic re-imagination was conceived and toward which it is aimed. The monumental film deploys history as a cipher to address cultural issues of the present by negotiating them as fictions about the past. The political dream Maximus and Cleopatra sacrifice themselves for over and against all romantic desire thrives and nourishes the possibility of utopian thinking in and for the present.

Joseph L. Mankiewicz' Return to Cleopatra

If Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* makes reference to Mankiewicz' *Cleopatra*, particularly in the lavish mise-en-scène celebrating the triumphal return of Maximus to Rome, the double voicing at issue in what was to become itself a fated chapter in the history of the Hollywood epic has been rendered complex by its truncated afterlife. Spyros Skouras, president of Twentieth Century Fox in the late 1950s, had chosen this monumental story in the hope that an epic film with great spectacles and glamorous stars would salvage the financial straits of his studio. Yet it came, as Constantine Santas notes, "at the end of an era, and it was indeed the epic that ended all epics of its kind". Owing to both its extraordinary expense and its length, it was cut by over two hours by the producers, "bringing it to a manageable length, rather than the six-hour, two-segment movie envi-

17 See Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957) which includes his entry on epic films entitled "The Romans in Films", translated by Annette Lavers (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972).

sioned by its director", and was never to be restored to its original length.[18] From James Beuselink's reconstruction of the screen play, one is, however, able to deduce that it was above all those scenes that show the Egyptian sovereign with her advisors or amongst her soldiers that were ultimately cut from the version that premiered 1963, prompting Elizabeth Taylor to throw up after the screening.[19] While the Taylor 'Look' – the dark eye make-up, the pink lipstick, the bob hair cut – have indelibly marked the way the 20th century thinks of Cleopatra, her screen performance is the first to foreground the political activities of the historic sovereign. Even in the shortened version of the film we find traces of a farsighted ruler, who represents the vision of a world united in peace. As Maria Wyke notes, "[I]n the climate of the early 1960s, Cleopatra could be depicted more comfortably as a woman of considerable political authority, whose great ambition it was to achieve the unity of East and West".[20] While a first draft of the screenplay labels her "an early-day Kennedy", Forster Hirsch, in his biography of Elizabeth Taylor, calls her "a kind of Eleanor Roosevelt captivated by the ideal of one-world unity".[21] Indeed, the film premiered the same year that Roosevelt's last book, *Tomorrow is Now*, was published, picking up on the debate for global peace she insisted on committing to paper as her final legacy just before her death.[22]

With historical distance to the monumental media hype around the release of *Cleopatra*, it is easier for us to recognize Mankiewicz' interpretation of this last Egyptian pharaoh as a political thinker who was able to combine intellect, authority and ambition with glamour, and who invested tremendous care in her son as the embodiment of a less militaristic political future. Like DeMille, he, too, conceived of his queen as the director in a political theater in which

18 Constantine Santas, *The Epic in Film: From Myth to Blockbuster* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008) 114. The financial miscalculations almost ruined Fox Studios, causing them to fire the original producer Walter Wanger, even though the film would eventually make a profit, especially upon its subsequent re-releases. The tempestuous romance between Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, bringing with it an alignment between the romance on and off screen as this was massively reported in global news coverage, at the time made it financially unfeasible to release the film in two parts. The first part focused almost exclusively on Cleopatra and her relationship with Julius Caesar, played by Rex Harrison. As Sobchack notes, the importance of the extratextual discourse about the extravagance and crisis in the case of the filming of *Cleopatra* adds to the extension of temporality typical of epic cinema (Sobchack 1995, 293).

19 See James Beuselink, "Mankiewicz' Cleopatra", *Films in Review* 39 (1988): 2–17.

20 Wyke 2002, 304.

21 Forster Hirsch, *Elizabeth Taylor* (New York: Pyramid Publications, 1978) 101.

22 Eleanor Roosevelt, *Tomorrow is Now*, re-issued with an introduction by Allida Black (1963; New York: Penguin, 2012).

she could not rule independently but only in fragile alliances with powerful members of the Roman Senate. Her first meeting with Julius Caesar plays to the voyeuristic expectations the film audience had come to expect from DeMille's staging of the carpet scene, in which a loyal slave hides her so as to by-pass the guards her brother has set up at the palace gates to prevent his sister from returning. Yet Taylor's performance also ironically breaks with all voyeuristic expectation, immediately pointing to the pain in her back which this cunning trick has inflicted on her. Equally seminal is the manner in which the scene is brought to conclusion. Taylor's Cleopatra not only insists from the moment she steps in front of Julius Caesar that he must recognize her as the sovereign of Egypt. She also proves to be the one who commands over the entire palace.

After having withdrawn from his presence, we see her high up in a hidden chamber adjacent to the chamber in which he is convening with his officers, behind an enormous sculpture of a sphinx adorning one of the walls. She gazes down at Caesar and his men, eavesdropping on their plans. Hers is a panoptic gaze, she sees everything, yet the vision is more than focused on the present. With this mise-en-scène we are not only informed of her clear-sightedness, which allows her to astutely assess her political dependence on Julius Caesar. The extreme close-up of her eyes behind the painted face of the Sphinx also anticipates her vision of a world empire over which her sons will rule in peace. Anticipating the discussion of restoring Rome's prior glory in Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*, we see her in a later scene in discussion with Julius Caesar, disclosing the political purpose of her feminine fertility. Comparing herself to the mother Nil, she promises to bear him many sons. Her design is to realize the dream Alexander, whom the Roman leader passionately admires, fought for. Standing before this ancestor's tomb, Cleopatra, in her own monumentalist rewriting of history, implores her lover to embark on a joint project to bring about with her and the son she is about to bear him. She describes the dream she wishes to share with him as bringing about "one world, one nation, one people on earth living in peace".

The foregrounding of her idiosyncratic vision, presenting her more as a passionate politician than a figure of tragic fate, finds its acme in her monumental entrance into Rome. There she sits together with Julius Caesar's son high up on an enormous black sphinx, a multitude of slaves pulling her magnificent carriage. The golden costume indicates both Cleopatra's opulent authority as well as the economic power Elizabeth Taylor commanded as a movie star. While the Egyptian pharaoh skillfully uses her personality cult to counter-act the demagoguery of the Roman senators, the Hollywood star audaciously flaunts her power as a global celebrity. Taylor was the first Hollywood actress to negotiate one million dollars as her fee for playing the part. Part and parcel of the monumen-

talist gesture that fuses screen presence with off-screen notoriety, the thousands of extras present during the filming of this spectacular entrance into Rome themselves rendered the boundary between contemporary film location and historical re-enactment fluid. Although they had been instructed to call out the name Cleopatra during the passage of the bombastic sphinx, they instead cried out 'Leez' in ecstasy, signaling their support of the woman the Vatican had denounced for her extramarital relation with her co-star. Yet Mankiewicz had himself come up with an unexpected dramaturgic trick. After having descended from her magnificent carriage and approached Julius Caesar with her son, Cleopatra bows before him. In response to his proud welcoming smile, she boldly winks at him with her right eye. In this political spectacle, banking on the enthusiastic reception of the audience, the presentation of this mutual son is instrumentalized for global power interests. At the same time, the wink not only functions as a clandestine sign of their intimacy which the excited crowd around them cannot see. As a close-up it is also directed explicitly at us. We are to participate both in the pride of the Egyptian sovereign at the public display of her embodied bond to Caesar and in Elizabeth Taylor's enjoyment of her ambition to be the most powerful global film icon of the early 1960s. The monumental twist of this epic that would end all epics resides in precisely this dissolution of the boundary between historic queen, screen refiguration and contemporary stardom.

In the second part of Mankiewicz' epic, Cleopatra, having left Rome after the assassination of Caesar, will try repeatedly to convince Mark Antony that his master must not be his love for her but her dream of defeating Octavian and ruling the world with him from a court based in Alexandria. Even after their disastrous defeat at Actium she pits her unsentimental clarity of vision against his romantic blindness. As she is forced to acknowledge the destruction of her fleet, her sober gaze speaks above all to the destruction of the dream she has been fighting for. Like DeMille before him, Mankiewicz works against the traditional image repertoire of Cleopatra's beautiful unclad corpse, presenting her performance of death instead as the final act in her assertion of absolute sovereignty. Having withdrawn into the monumental vault, accompanied only by her two trusted serving women, she commands Iras and Charmian to dress her for her travels in the dress of gold she wore during her entrance into Rome. As she explains to her serving women, she wants to be "as Antony first saw me ... he must know at once even from a great distance that it is I". This is, however, also the costume that signifies the acme of her skillful theatricalization of her power; the emblem of her having won over the people of Rome both on screen and off.

To the end, Taylor's Cleopatra insists on her political vision. After she has sat down on the marble slab on which she will have her corpse put on display,

she opens the basket where the fatal asp is crawling among the figs. The camera moves into a medium shot as she places her hand into the basket (in contrast to traditional paintings that depict her taking the asp to her naked breast). Then Taylor's Cleopatra notes how strangely awake she suddenly feels: "[A]s if living had been just a long dream, someone else's dream, now finished at last". As we see her briefly wince to signal that the asp has bitten her hand, the camera moves into a close-up, while with her dying breath she asserts, "but now will begin a dream of my own which will never end". The destruction of her world is also the sign of radical hope. Her last words cement the way that for Cleopatra, using her seductive charm as a form of politics, emerged as a contradiction between love (for the powerful men without whom she could not rule) and politics; between a shared vision she could not realize and her own dream. In contrast to Colbert's interpretation of this role, however, Taylor's Cleopatra does not die for love but as a sovereign who has acknowledged that she could have implemented her political vision only as the lover of Roman commanders. Death, in turn, offers her the possibility of radical autonomy.

In the final scene of this cinematic re-imagination, an enraged Octavian breaks into the vault to find Cleopatra's corpse, dressed in full regalia, stretched out on the marble coffin, her two serving women dying at her feet. He flees in horror, while his commanding officer Agrippa angrily asks of Charmian, who still has some life in her, "Was this well done of your lady?" Rephrasing Shakespeare's text, she responds: "Extremely well as befitting the last of so many noble rulers".[23] Then, as the camera moves back, the voice-over picks up this final dialog, repeating "and the Roman asked, 'Was this well done of your lady?' and the servant answered, 'Extremely well, as befitting the last of so many noble rulers'". Seamlessly we move from a diegetic scene to an extra-diegetic commentary, accompanying a *tableau mort* that transforms into a frozen image of the golden-clad corpse of Cleopatra, lying on her stark white marble coffin, at her feet her two serving women as well as the over-turned basket, with the figs spilled out on the floor. The silenced Roman witness, also, has frozen into immobility while the camera moves further back, passing over the threshold of the vault, moving from the re-enacted historical past to its traces in the present. In contrast to Mankiewicz' mise-en-scène the door does not fall shut. Instead, the death scene we see through its narrow opening slowly transforms from a cinematic scene to the fragment of a painting in relief on the outside wall of this mausoleum.

23 In the original play, Charmian's final words are: "It is well done, and fitting for a princess / Descended of so many royal kings. Ah, soldier!" (5.2.325–327). See William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, The Arden Edition, ed. M. R. Ridley (London: Routledge, 1991).

Conclusion

At the end of Mankiewicz' *Cleopatra*, the unadorned pieces of grey stone in between the painted image chards that have remained on the outside wall of the grave monument visually underline the self-reflexive gesture this essay claims to be the rhetorical ploy of monumental epic cinema as such. As a past brought back to life is frozen first into a final tableau and then into a representation of this scene painted on stone, we have moved through several layers of aesthetic formalization, which by rescuscitating the past transcend time even as they condense it. Both the voice-over commentary as well as the mise-en-scène, pulling us back from the performed scene into our contemporary moment, cast the viewer in relation to a past event. As Sobchack argues for epic films in general, this rescuscitated past, "by reflexive authorial focus, is foregrounded as retrospectively and now historically significant. It also repeats the dramatic representation in a reflexive and reflective mode – creating an additional textual level that temporally extends the emplotment of the story from the past to the present and confers significance on the story from the present to the past".[24] The monumentality of epic cinema thus speaks not only to the spectacular significance of the past events resurrected by the narrative, nor simply to the extravaganza of the décor and mise-scène by which they are re-imaged on screen. It also produces a double vision that speaks to a past by infusing the present with its visual and dramatic force. We have entered into the past only to again step back from it, called upon in our imaginary capacity to conceive ourselves in relation to the way we might have been then. The distance produced is not that of postmodernism's irony but rather a re-appraisal of the past through the lens of its subsequent cinematic recyclings. The authority it makes a claim to lies not beyond but on the surface of the cinematic image.

The monumentalist style adapts itself to each era, with acting styles, set and costume design as well as the technological possibilities available making for a difference between the 1930s, the 1960s and the turn into the 21st century. Each of the films discussed must be seen as double voiced, in the case of both Cleopatra films recalling the same historical event in the context of very distinct current political concerns. De Mille's *Cleopatra* is produced at a time when fascist forces were coming into power in Europe, while Roosevelt sought to make good on the New Deal he had promised America. Even if doing so only obliquely, by staging the political transition from Cleopatra's allegedly hedonistic reign to the harshness of Roman hegemony under Octavius, the film references

24 Sobschack 1995, 292.

both the hopes and anxieties regarding a global shift towards a centralization of political power in the 1930s. At the same time, the monumentalist gesture of this historical refiguration feeds into the consumer culture of modernity, pitting the elegance of the costumes and décor against all lessons to be learned from history. Mankiewicz' *Cleopatra*, in turn, comes at the end of the classical Hollywood Studio System, offering a swan song to the epic genre by re-creating it in excessive splendour. Far more explicitly political than the earlier version, the film's narrative also anticipates the end of a cultural moment, with the war in Southeast Asia and the Civil Rights movement at home calling for a critique of precisely the mythic re-encodings of the past which Hollywood's epic films had come to be known for.

Gladiator, in turn, explicitly foregrounds the technical ability of computer generated re-imaginations of past worlds on screen. In contrast to the artifice of classic Hollywood's monumentalism, whose excessive costumes, sets and mise-en-scène of crowds were staged on locations and in studio lots, Scott's epic draws attention to the artificial production of the cinematic image. The Rome we have access to on screen is a self-consciously digital world. Yet *Gladiator* also attests to the comeback of an epic monumentalism in that it taps into the affective charge of this genre's grand mythic re-figuration of the past. By citing the monumentalism of Mankiewicz' visual style in the context of a narrative predicated on the awe and pity tragic heroism is meant to elicit, *Gladiator* replaces postmodernism's "any thing goes". As such, this film brings together the unironic pathos of the classic film epic's re-imagination of the past with digitally produced visual worlds that transcend all reference beyond the film image. With CGI and 3D becoming increasingly popular in the last decade, film length, visual opulence and an overwhelming of the audience have again come to dominate Hollywood cinema. In tandem with this technological shift, monumentalism has moved into other genres, notably the war film (*Saving Private Ryan*, *Letters from Iwo Jima*), the historical melodrama (*Age of Innocence*, *Titanic*), and fantasy (*Lord of the Rings*, *Life of Pi*). While these genres are less concerned with appropriating ancient history for the present, they, too, forego the critical irony of the postmodern by again foregrounding the issue of an affective identification.

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